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ABSTRACT

A five-aided program for helping rural families in Vermont is summarized. Help is being given to agriculture, the home, the young people, the underprivileged, and the community itself. The overall aim is a balanced environment. It is pointed out that change characterizes rural Vermont and that a need for a balanced environment is slowly being recognized. The program operates as follows: (1) An aide visits a family, gets a picture of the situation; (2) The aide initiates preliminary assistance with the family; (3) Aide and counselor together clarify family health situation; (4) The farm aide works with the family on farm and home problems that have come to the surface; and (5) Followup is continued with the family. Three basic guidelines have regulated the enrollment and acceptance of cases: (1) The family must have a net annual income of less than $2000; (2) It must have relation to agriculture; (3) A member of the family must have an identified health problem. Results were two broad areas of project action and accomplishment: (1) the public type of assistance in which there was work with agencies and officials relevant to the development of policies and program related to the concerns of disadvantaged families; (2) the major work of the project which consisted of assistance provided and accomplishments of the individual families. It is concluded that the three factors contributing to the success of the project were: (1) the Extension-Vocational Rehabilitation team approach, (2) the high commitment and quality of staff in serving rural families, and (3) the practical supervision. (For related document, see AC 012 983.) (Author/CK)

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BOLSTERING UP RURAL FAMILIE IN VERMONT

Short Version
of an Evaluation
of a Team Pilot Project

Rural and Farm Family
Rehabilitation Project

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FOREWORD

The purpose of this piece is to tell the story of a unique innovative project which has been underway in Vermont during the last three years, to see what could be done about more effectively serving rural families in disadvantaged situations. It was a team project between two agencies, and the model proved to be successful from the standpoint of achieving results in improving family situations and agency program strategy.

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A somewhat more comprehensive evaluation of the project, entitled An Expansion in Program Strategy to Assist Rural Families Faced With Limiting Conditions, is also available. It primarily deals with an analysis of the educational process and especially the utilization of aides and counselors in working with families on a one-to-one basis relative to their overall family situations. This is a cooperative study with the authors being E. J. Niederfrank, Rural Sociologist, Extension Service, and Nelson L. LeRay, Sociologist, Economic Research Service, both of the United States Department of Agriculture.

Results of the project could have widespread application and benefit throughout the country. It is also in line with goals of the President's Committee on Employment of the Handicapped and specifically of its Rural Areas Committee.

Special acknowledgement is expressed for the assistance in the evaluation provided by William W. Stone, Supervisor, University of Vermont Extension Service, who was project director, Lester Ravlin, Project Coordinator, and to the field staff of the project.

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U. S. Department of Agriculture
Extension Service

BOLSTERING UP RURAL FAMILIES IN VERMONT

A Short Version of an Evaluation of a Pilot Project

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I. EXTENSION'S EXPANDING OUTREACH

The Changing Situation Produces New Challenges

Some time ago, a young African official was visiting the United States to study the Extension Service in several places. Vermont was his first stop.

As is common with such study, he was immersed in a sea of tours and briefings. He attended a monthly meeting of the State specialists, visited farms with the agricultural agents, played table tennis with underprivileged youngsters at a 4-H camp, listened while women agents explained the basic four of nutrition. His English was limited and his environment was different. At home, women stayed in the background, the rich played, not the poor, and science was something kept in laboratories and libraries, not brought to farms.

What was he thinking? How was he reacting? Finally, his new U. S. Extension friend-host could stand it no longer. On the final day he was asked, no holds barred, the plain truth, what did he think of Extension Education, what was it all about? He was silent for a moment and then his reply came back with that level gaze he had for everything, "I think Extension is people helping people." A simple answer and yet it said it all.

Helping people is the real purpose behind the Vermont Extension Service. Currently, its program could be called five-sided. Help is being given to agriculture, the home, the young people, the underprivileged, and the

community itself. The overall aim is a balanced environment, a Vermont where no one is left behind, where it is possible to live and work in a way that recognizes both the sweat and the sweetness of life and the need of both for human fulfillment.

A couple of points must be made. First, change characterizes rural Vermont, seemingly more so than ever before. The dairy farms are gradually getting larger as smaller farms give way; land values are steadily rising as new nonfarm families take up settlement; real estate taxes are high; a changing industrial economy here and there also affects agriculture; and local populations become older as young people tend to leave rural areas. Thus, the Extension program today is different from last year; it will be different next year. Extension aims to meet needs, and tries to anticipate them.

The second point is balance. Some would have Extension concentrate on the environment or agriculture or the poor or some other topics -- the list is long. Extension's 200 local advisors (rank and file Vermonters who meet monthly with the staff), as well as the staff itself, feel that a balanced approach is best. They believe that the fabric of society cannot be torn in one place without endangering all. Other citizen leaders also had begun thinking this way.

A Special Problem Recognized

Thus, the need for a better balanced program was becoming increasingly apparent in order to serve the many rural families who were in disadvantaged situations for one reason or another, as one looked at various statistics and also as could be seen throughout the countryside of the State.

Also based on the experience of a previous preliminary project, most of these families were known to be isolated cases, trying to run smaller than average dairy farms consisting of limited meadows, lots of woods, barns needing repairs and better equipment, and both the farms and homes especially in need of better management. Many of the farm operators and spouses were getting up in years, and nearly all could be expected to have physical impairments either of poor health or the results of accident. Health bills and unwise or inadequate financing were retarding needed improvements in farm operations and family living. Frequently family spirit would be found sinking, and a few were on the verge of losing their places and having to find a rental probably in a town and going on welfare. They also are faced with a general lack of basic education, trade skills and up-to-date knowledge about farming and about public programs that could assist, while at the same time the community is short on jobs and job training. Community participation of these families also is known to be limited. They are not group oriented and cannot be served through the commonly used organizations of the area. Nor is it sound to think that disadvantaged families as such can be formed into groups merely on a geographic community basis.

Many of such families are found scattered throughout Vermont today, as well as in the whole Northeast. They are not on welfare and they strongly want to stay above that level.

The point is that a big gap in program development was evident which was all the more discernible since the "established or traditional" programs of agencies often do not seem to fit the special conditions of these families. These programs generally are concerned with particular subjects or specific problems in more or less sophisticated agency-centered programs and methods geared to serving the already responsive, and do not generally endeavor to seek out the many "reticent" families who can only be lifted up by a more intensive personalized approach.

The overall, long range result of the impairments and conditions of the disadvantaged or less responsive families is growing family debt, decay of property, diminishing family income and destruction of land resources. Just as important, there is also the ultimate decline of courage, spirit, and personal dignity -- motivation weakens. Worst of all, these effects hit hardest upon the youth and young families.

II. NEW PILOT PROJECT LAUNCHED

A Team Project

Thus, having in mind the difficult conditions of many rural families in the State, the University of Vermont Extension Service and the State Vocational Rehabilitation Division teamed up to design a Statewide pilot effort called the Rural and Farm Family Rehabilitation Project. The idea was to see what could be done to more effectively serve the increasing numbers of families who were finding themselves with their back to the wall, and this project was launched in March 1969. It was clear that something different was needed in the way of a program to help such families get back on their feet.

Based on some previous experience using farm aides to assist county agricultural agents, this new project was designed to be a cooperative or team approach between Extension and Vocational Rehabilitation, using both farm family aides and vocational rehabilitation counselors working together with client families according to each family's overall physical, financial, farm and home situation.

Financing of the project was provided through an Expansion Project Grant (Sec.4(a)(2)(A)) of the Vocational Rehabilitation Act, Department of Health, Education and Welfare; federal share 90 percent; duration March 1, 1969 to February 28, 1972; with total project expenditures being approximately $650,000 for the three years.

The field staff of the project consisted of 6 farm family aides, 4 counselors, and 4 secretaries, located in 4 district offices, serving all 14 counties of the State. At the State level there was a project director, a project coordinator of the field work, and a casework supervisor of vocational rehabilitation. The aides and counselors were more professional than indigenous leaders, and they drew salaries somewhere near beginning assistant extension agents. Selection of them was based on their understanding of disadvantaged family and farm situations and demonstrated ability to work with people.

Prospective client families in need were identified from information provided by county extension agents, welfare offices, town clerks or overseers of the poor, and other individuals; also by field staff members themselves stopping in to visit families where they might need assistance.

In other words, there was a deliberate seeking out of families and helping them to assistance. This was different from merely the usual approach of public agencies responding to request of families who are willing and able to go on their own for help on particular problems or expecting people who need help to attend educational meetings and read mailed information. Experience in Vermont was showing that too many families simply were not up to doing all this themselves.

How the Project Works

1. The aide visits a family, gets a picture of the situation and identifies one or more problems or matters especially concerning the family upon which to work. Sometimes it takes several visits over a period of weeks before rapport and confidence are truly established.

2. The aide initiates preliminary assistance with the family which may involve referral to some agency and often considerable educational work with the family before they will agree to and be able to make contact with the agency. Preparatory contact is also made by the aide with the agency to explain the referral case beforehand.

3. During this process one or more health problems generally come to the surface and here the aide automatically refers the case to the vocational rehabilitation counselor. The aide and counselor working together get the operator and spouse to have physical examinations in order to clarify the family health situation and identify any physical restoration needs. Then treatment work is started, based on a plan worked out with the counselor. All this is done in cooperation with the physicians, dentists, public health units, and hospitals.

4. By this time the farm family aide is working with the family on farm and home problems that have come to the surface. These may involve the getting of a loan, also land and dairy herd management, barn improvement, equipment operation and the like. A basic procedure in this regard is the working out of a farm plan with the family.

The basic goal is to get the family in shape health-wise and on the road to more income and solution of other problems.

5. Followup is continued with the family, helping it obtain needed assistances from various sources, until problems are solved and accomplishments made in line with this basic goal. A time is reached when the case is put on the vocational rehabilitation list of closures and in the inactive file of the farm family aide. Contacts of the family with the project are now only incidental or for a special purpose, for the family has now learned to relate to the regular resources as needs arise.

Three basic guidelines have regulated the enrollment and acceptance of cases for assistance of the project. One was that the family have a net annual income of less than $2000, and, secondly, it have relation to agriculture. A third factor was that a member of the family have an identified health problem as determined by the head and spouse each having a general physical examination which then would be followed up by the vocational rehabilitation counselor. Additional medical examinations sometimes were necessary, and sometimes the handicap of some other member of the family also may be given consideration.

In each county the project was first discussed with the County Extension Board and it is kept informed of the work as a part of the total extension program. The project field staff meets with each county agricultural agent monthly to review active cases, and the aides and counselors meet and work with any of the extension staff members anytime about particular cases. Sometimes the home economist, extension aide or farm forester was brought into a case. It was run as a State project apart from direct county control.

The State Vocational Rehabilitation Office has throughout been highly interested in the project, and was kept informed of progress through the reports of the project's Vocational Rehabilitation Supervisor working with the counselors on the project. Records show that the number of closures and other features of the case loads compare favorably with those of the regular vocational rehabilitation program in the State.

A benchmark study of 450 client families by the University of Vermont Agricultural Experiment Station as part of a regional project in cooperation with the USDA Economic Research Service, showed that nearly all client families owned their place; 54 percent had lived there prior to 1960, 15 percent before 1940; and most of the family heads were over age 50. Only 4 percent had any thought of giving up farming or leaving their place, and only 7 percent had made any plans for retiring. All but 2 percent of the heads had a social security number but 34 percent of the spouses did not. About two-thirds of the families were in debt with a real estate mortgage and nearly half had personal property or note indebtedness. Only about half had an active life insurance policy; two-thirds had family hospital insurance. Housing was estimated as good in 60 percent of the cases. About 72 percent of the clients were actively engaged in

dairy production but their herds were small, generally under 25 cows. Many had not participated in government agricultural programs nor followed modern production practices, such as soil testing, recommended care of animals, use of dusts and sprays on crops, or herd testing programs. In only 13 percent of the families had any person received any special form of education, training or testing for employment. Sixty-five percent reported having one or more persons in the family with a physical disability. About a fourth of the clients might be said were of minority identification, mostly French Canadian, and some reported having had the feeling of being treated as such by officials or resource people upon occasion in dealing with their problems.

Records and Evaluation

Excellent records have been kept on the work of the project throughout the years of its operation. These include records of all contacts with all the families, including what was done with them and their progress; records of all the referrals to other resources and the results of the referrals; and records of all contacts of field staff with supervisors.

In addition to information from these data, the evaluative writeup of the project now being completed is also based on three weeks of field work in Vermont by the author, which included interviews with all field staff and State staff members, with the officials of State agencies involved, with some of the local field personnel of agencies to who referrals were made, and with a number of client families representative of the types of cases served. The official project proposal and annual reports of the project also provided helpful information.

III. RESULTS, ACCOMPLISHMENTS

Types of Assistance

The project has resulted in two broad areas of project action and accomplishment. One is the public type of assistance in which there was work with agencies and officials relevant to the development of policies and program related to the concerns of disadvantaged families. The second type of action and accomplishment is the major work of the project which consisted of assistance provided and accomplishments of the individual families.

1. Public Type Results

Employment training -- A major public contribution of the project was the part it played in getting certain MDTA training courses established and getting persons among the client families of the project enrolled in these courses for improving skills and income. The liaison was spearheaded by the project at the State level working with the State Committee having a responsibility for the MDTA training program in cooperation with the Office of Employment Security, resulting in expanding the outreach of this program to rural people who normally would not be reached by it.

Through the support of the project, manpower training was conducted in Farm Machinery Repair, Christmas Tree Production, Christmas Decoration and Wreath Making, Farm Building Maintenance, and Welding. These trainings have provided development of skills for employment, and numbers of client families of the project participated in them and have improved their employment as a result. Considerable credit for assistance in getting these trainings established and getting enrollment in them is given to the project by State officials.

In addition various specialized trainings of the State Department of Education were supported, including adult farmer course, young farmer course, high school equivalency and adult basic education. Clients were also enrolled in Nurse training, Auto Mechanics, Restaurant work and several office training courses. A few youth were aided in entering college or vocational schools. All in all, nearly 250 persons in outlying areas of Vermont were gotten into training of one kind or another by the project.

Public attitude development -- Another public contribution of the project has been the information provided from time to time to welfare and other officials about rural disadvantaged situations to help in decision making pertinent to program adjustments. Information about rural conditions and the project is also presented by project staff members to community organization meetings and agency staff meetings upon occasion. The public image of the project was found to be generally favorable as indicated by interviews with officials, agency people, and client families. Persons were heard to say, "Well, for once this is the way a program ought to work in dealing with this type of problem."

2. Individual Type Assistances and Results

It is noteworthy that a total of 1228 families with 4826 members were enrolled and served by the project during the course of its three years' duration. Of these families, 853 persons received vocational rehabilitation assistance, and 300 totally rehabilitated by the end of the three-year project. Below is a list of types of assistances received from the project as recorded from the direct statements of the families interviewed. In addition, project records and other information indicate that such results were repeated many times in the course of the work on the project.

Physical Restoration

1. Obtained new false teeth, reducing rheumatism and other troubles.
2. Obtained new glasses for the first time; now can read beneficially.
3. Obtained back brace.
4. Obtained much dental work done on wife.
5. Got injured arm back in shape.
6. Help in identifying need for and having hernia operation.
7. Went to hospital several times for surgery, treatment, on special diet.

8. Obtained hearing aid, which is now so helpful in both farming operation and living.

9. Fixed up a farm laborer health-wise who was in bad shape; now planning to get into some specialized farm training opportunities as they develop.

10. Both man and wife going in for further health tests.

Farming Operation and Other Income

1. Getting financing for new automatic dairying equipment in barn; in another case financing for building a new barn.

2. Refinancing farm debt situation, saving the place from foreclosure; in another case saved farm from being sold cheap to a land speculator.

3. Worked on finding a hired man.

4. Received advice on crop management and care of meadows from aide and from the extension agent and SCS brought into the case.

5. Received herd management advice from aide and extension agent, increasing production of herd; also upgrading quality of herd.

6. Received advice on farm forestry management for income from extension forester.

7. Got financing for a new tractor; another added more cattle; in another case advice and financing have resulted in increasing herd from 10 milk cows to 30.

8. Arrangement made for getting three foster care boarders from State hospital to add to family income.

9. Selling $300-400 worth of Christmas tree decorations based on training received in MDTA short-course; another group of clients took a contract for selling $10,000 worth of wreaths.

10. Aide advised and helped work out plans for raising veal calves to enhance income.

11. Got a farm laborer to attend farm machinery course; several farmers also, thus resulting in much saving of repair expenses.

12. Got two sons into MDTA training, both now well employed.

1. Helped get citizenship straightened out; essential in order to get agencies and firms willing to work with them.

2. Helped daughter get into one-year MDTA nurse training course; now employed.

3. Cleared up procedure for getting Social Security pension.

4. Now am much more willing and able to make contacts with agencies.

5. Counseling on parent-son relations to keep youth in family and interested in the farm.

6. Helped family obtain official guardianship of a youth who was threatened with being taken away.

7. Got family on food stamp program; another on medicaid.

8. Saved the place by aide being persistent with power company in getting power restored to new location of house free of charge, after installation taken away by highway construction.

9. Helped get rid of shack and other cleanup, and a new simple house built.

10. Helped in several cases with family garden projects.

11. Got our youth into a 4-H club. A few client families also have gotten into extension meetings and similar programs.

Several remarked that "the most help received was in keeping up our morale," "aide help came just in time," "project makes us feel like we are worth helping," "the first person in a long time who seemed to care about us."

A grand total of 11,783 referrals were made by the project staff to 24 different types of public agencies and private resources. Most of these were to the county extension services; the employment security, manpower and education agencies; the Vocational Rehabilitation Division; and to the agricultural agencies, especially the Farmers Home Administration in connection with farm credit. The aides held about 4040 training consultations and 2000 other visits with clients, and the rehabilitation counselors held 2500 visits with clients and about 650 visits with medical and related resources on behalf of clients.

Results From Viewpoint of Staff

Field staff members were asked what they felt they had most accomplished with client families; what results of the project had given them the greatest satisfactions. These are summarized and listed below, not necessarily in any order of importance or classification, because their importance would vary by cases and some would be interrelated with one another.

... Getting the families on their feet, on a more solid footing.

... Seeing the families make specific improvements or take other specific actions as a result of suggestions.

... Having the vocational rehabilitation services brought to people and seeing the improvements in health, giving the families a new lift.

... Seeing the families have a more secure financial position due to the help provided relative to credit.

... Changes seen in management of farm and home affairs; more informed and skilled about how to do things, resulting in more income and improved quality of living.

... Having a part in facilitating the short-course job training and getting clients enrolled in these, then seeing them make use of or benefiting from this training.

... Getting families to do a better job of planning ahead.

... Seeing the improved attitude on the part of the families -- more confidence in themselves, more courage, more dignity and pride now; gladness from now being in a better situation.

... Seeing the families become more self-reliant, more willing and able to seek out further assistances and services of various resources.

... Seeing the resource agencies be very cooperative in serving the disavantaged families.

... Improved youth situation in some of the families; several have been moved into more education; the better family situation improves the confidence and attitudes of the young people, too.

Both Economic and Human Benefits

The types of accomplishments mentioned in the above lists reveal both economic benefits and human benefits; the project did give rise to both kinds and one is just as important as the other. The highly tangible gains are usually the easiest and most readily recognized, but often the less tangible or intangible gains are more important to the family.

The tangible benefits are seen in such things as greater farm productivity, increases in income, improvements in health, stronger financial position in ownership of the place and improved physical surroundings. Just as important, or perhaps more so, are the intangible benefits of the project, such as:

*** The families having greater feeling of security.

*** The families having greater self-confidence, courage, uplift of morale, new motivation.

*** The families having increased skills, knowledge, and abilities to do the things that need to be done.

*** The families having a feeling of home-place values being preserved; they do not have to move away.

*** The families getting out into functioning society, with more willingness and ability to seek out assistances, meet needs.

*** The greater concern of agencies in broadening programs and improving delivery of services to better serve all segments of rural communities.

*** More teamwork or cooperation among agencies, focusing on problems of the people rather than just on participation of people in an agency's special-interest program or subject.

The cost of the three-year project figures out to be about $540 per client family, which is far less than some welfare programs and is insignificant when viewed in comparison with the improved income and living conditions of the families served. In many cases this cost would be covered in the first year's increase of income and better living. Furthermore, it represents a nonrecurring expenditure.

The point is that the project is primarily a self-help program with emphasis on faith in people and investing in them for greater productivity -- truly human resource development.

Some Lessons Learned

... We learned that there are many rural families in Vermont who are needing and wanting educational assistance and who can only be served by an intensive personal approach based primarily on total situation.

... We learned that they can be effectively served by this personal approach and brought into more adequate health, income and living situations.

... We learned that a team approach between two agencies having programs most directly concerned with the total situation of disadvantaged families can work. The results obtained by them could never have been obtained without the input of both Vocational Rehabilitation and the Extension Service, provided in coordinated fashion and with other pertinent agencies.

... We learned that institutional patterns of specialized agency programs can be adjusted and shared without undue violence to programs when effective service to the people is the central focus.

... We learned that such a program does require personnel having particular qualifications and that continued training and servicing of them is essential.

... We learned that a program such as that represented by the purposes and methods of the Rural and Farm Family Rehabilitation Project can receive the support of local government and the people.

... We learned that a program can have both economic and human development satisfactions and that the two are interrelated, each being highly important to the other, and one just as important as the other.

... We learned that such a program can result in expansion of delivery of services by agencies to families who otherwise would not be served.

... We learned that such a project can be admirably fitted into and carried on successfully within the framework of Extension structure and education process. The approach of a project can be basically educational and referral or assistance-oriented, based on the real situation of families. A project can provide a coordinating function not otherwise readily available yet fundamentally needed by families. The referral idea need not take away from Extension or any other agency; basis for public support can be gained by each; not necessarily lost.

Probably the three most significant factors contributing to the success of the project were: (1) the Extension-Vocational Rehabilitation team approach, (2) the high commitment and quality of staff in serving rural families having special problems as encountered in the client cases, and (3) the strong, controlled but practical supervision.

It is not a give-away program at all, but rather the expansion of the outreach of related educational services. This must be the direction of programs that truly serve the large segment of Rural America faced with special problems.

ERIC Clearinghouse

JUL 25 1972

on Adult Education

This summary by E. J. Niederfrank, Rural Sociologist, Extension Service, United States Department of Agriculture, written in cooperation with the State staff of the project, is preliminary to a more complete evaluation of the project planned for early 1972.